

“Sri Lanka in Transition”

Heidelberg, 7. Dezember 2004

On December 7, 2004, the South Asia Institute (SAI) of Heidelberg University held a seminar entitled: ‘Sri Lanka in Transition: Current Issues of Economics, Gender Relations, Ethnicity and Poverty Reduction’. Four scholarship holders from Sri Lanka – three geographers and one economist – presented papers. The researchers were visiting the SAI under a programme sponsored by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) that had brought members of the SAI to Sri Lanka in three consecutive years. There they had held seminars jointly with Colombo University (2004 also with the Eastern University), selecting short term fellows from among the lecturers at Colombo University and inviting them for short visits to Heidelberg. Jürgen Clemens (Geography) and Wolfgang-Peter Zingel (International Economics) who had been in Sri Lanka in 2004 organized the workshop, supported by the SAI’s office in Colombo and the SAI Sri Lanka Working Group. Otherwise, academic research on Sri Lanka in Germany is of a lamentably small scope and range. It would thus be useful to extend the scope and duration of the programme and to include representatives of other disciplines – history, cultural anthropology, sociology – in order to emphasize that transition and globalisation comprise more than economics and geography and to fill research voids shown in the discussion. This is even more necessary after the tsunami disrupted economic and social structures in the country, quite apart from the loss of lives.

Being one of the rare occasions to discuss Sri Lanka at an academic (interdisciplinary) forum in Germany, the seminar was well attended and drew participants from outside Heidelberg as well, among them professors Manfred Domrös and Hans-Joachim Fuchs from Mainz. The sessions were chaired by professors Clive Bell (SAI, economics) and Wolfgang Werner (geography); Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam summed up the results of the discussion at the end of the workshop.

The fact that many academics and scientists left the country due to the war has obviously had an impact on the quality of research not only in the north, but countrywide. More than once the concepts and definitions lacked clarity and were outdated; new data, although available, were not used, and approaches remained rather technical, restricted to technicalities, not focused and/or limited to small geographical areas.

With “Dynamics of Real Exchange Rate in Sri Lanka: An Econometric Approach” Tilak Susantha Liyanaarachchi presented a detailed and technical paper on factors influencing exchange rates in Sri Lanka. He mentioned particularly the terms of trade and domestic productivity. The assumption that

low productivity keeps exchange rates low was questioned in the discussion: Over- or undervaluation of the currency usually leads to capital movements out of or into the country, to restrictions on capital movements and to the emergence of black markets. None of this can be seen to exist in Sri Lanka on a larger scale. Other factors like fiscal policy can heavily influence exchange rates and the long period of fixed exchange rates cannot easily be explained econometrically. Clive Bell raised the question of floating exchange rates, currency baskets and export restrictions on exchange rates and noted that in selected areas productivity has increased or remained stable – against the trend. In answer to a further question Liyanaarachchi explained that despite the increase in military expenditure this still only amounts to a very small proportion of GNP. The cost of war, however, should rather be measured by the decline in growth, as W.-P. Zingel pointed out. In sum, the question whether fiscal measures and the manipulation of exchange rates really address the basic problem of the Sri Lankan economy or what other measures would be needed, remained unresolved.

Sharmelee Ramesh (“Gender Issues on Household Food Security Systems: Case Study of Women’s Role in Perriyakullam Village, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka”) presented first results of her field research conducted in a so-called resettlement village in Trincomalee district, dealing with the problem of the scarcity of staple foods in the crisis areas of the northeast in general and its impact on women in particular. In these villages inhabitants displaced by the civil war are resettled with the help of government and NGO funds. The author’s main focus was on female-headed households that face particular difficulties in securing sufficient food and food resources.

The recommendations about how to improve their situation, however, still need differentiation. Manfred Domrös remarked that women’s organisations and attempts to strengthen women’s self-confidence cannot by themselves lead to an improvement in economic performance. It would be more crucial to address the causes rather than symptoms of poverty, and, say, repair irrigation facilities in the dry zone. In his view, the economic structure of the resettled population is also important: if the richer inhabitants had moved away, this could be a reason for economic and agricultural decay. Did the selected village lend itself to more general conclusions or did it merely reflect the situation conditioned by the war? An important finding was that the position of head of household seems to provide women neither with more self-confidence nor with more freedom of decision, a finding that seems to go against received wisdom that, traditionally, women are responsible for securing and supplying staple foods and goods within the family. Apparently the war has prevented the passing on of skills and knowledge from one generation to the next, which seems to apply generally to the population affected by the tsunami as well.

People are obviously not able to make use of available resources because of a breakdown of social networks during the war that has exacerbated the general effects of poverty. In contrast, it was pointed out by Darini Senanayake that in some areas the war has improved the self-perception of women.

Lasantha Manawadu ("Ethnic Segregation and Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Minority Groups in the City of Colombo") examined the phenomenon of ethnic segregation in Colombo, concentrating on the Tamil and Muslim minorities. Outdated and imprecise definitions of key terms and variables, however, cannot yield explanations of recent developments, i.e. the large-scale displacement of people since the beginning of the civil war. This applies especially to the relationship between ethnic and socio-economic segregation and to ethnic choice between majority and minority. Choosing Colombo's wards as the level of analysis turned out to be a major weakness of the study: A further disaggregation would have shown the high concentration of "ethnicities" within wards of "mixed" population. It was not apparent, either, why Manawadu seemed to consider ethnic segregation undesirable.

The period of investigation, from 1963 till 1981, was a major drawback, because this limitation meant that recent developments and, particularly the changes brought about by the civil war, were not considered. Besides, the data from the 2001 census are now available. The shifts in the cohabitation of ethnic groups, interethnic communication and ethnic perceptions would have significantly contributed to individual and group decisions about settlement and might have shown that ethnic segregation is directly tied to a situation of political conflict and can therefore not be generalized. It was also observed that it might be that the ethnic majority was interested in the construction of ethnic ghettos, a question Manawadu (for apparently obvious reasons) evaded.

The additional variables would probably influence socio-economic conditions, occupations, and settlement patterns, particularly for minority groups. The ethnic variable was not considered helpful to explain patterns of segregation.

Prof. Yoga Rasanayagam ("Poverty Reduction Strategies: The Sri Lankan Experience") complemented the second paper by raising the question of reduction and eradication of poverty, too. Since independence, various governments have taken diverse steps to eradicate poverty, ranging from social welfare measures and the creation of equal chances to attempts at the reduction of individual poverty. Rasanayagam introduced two government programmes, Janasaviya und Samurdhi, both of which had improved the physical quality of life according to the Human Poverty Index. Though Sri Lanka has a remarkably high Human Development Index in spite of belonging to the group of poor countries, one third of the population is still considered poor or very

poor. During their implementation all programmes have encountered problems concerning selection of personnel, exit strategies, and supervision. That the "target group" has developed an over-reliance on aid, became evident after the tsunami – particularly striking compared to the comparatively fast rehabilitation occurring in India.

The feasibility of a bottom-up approach and the usefulness of poverty reduction programmes were queried in the discussion as well as the advantage of the latter over traditional welfare programmes. In fact, it was the welfare measures that contributed to the improved HDI index. The political affiliation and background of many of these programmes was considered an additional drawback. Moreover, it was doubted whether any of these programmes could be successful if causes of poverty like restricted access to land, water and resources were not addressed and as long as the areas devastated by the war were disregarded.

The seminar's limitation to geography and economics occurred less on purpose but because the promising applicants for the fellowships came from these disciplines. They did, however, address important aspects of the country's development beyond the boundaries of their disciplines and pointed to the direction further research will have to take. What struck participants most forcefully were the gaps in knowledge and methodology that have to be closed. Publication of the contributions, once revised, is intended in the 'Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics', the web journal of the SAI.

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"Jaina Law and the Jaina Community"

London, 17–18 March 2005

In recent years, the annual international Jain Studies Workshops at the School of Oriental and African Studies have developed into one of the most important venues for the global network of scholars studying the Jain tradition. This is no mean achievement in a field of study which from its infancy in the mid-19th century suffered from a chronic lack of communication amongst the small group of specialists from different academic disciplines in India and abroad. The symposium at SOAS is now a fixture in the academic calendar. It is also recognised as an important event for the Jain community. The unique atmosphere of the public workshops at SOAS is due to the vibrant presence of a sizable number of members of the academic and, in particular, of the Jain community